

Apparition of the Sign of the Precious Cross Over Jerusalem, in 351 A.D

The Precious Cross appeared in the sky over Jerusalem on the morning of May 7, 351 during the reign of the emperor Constantius, the son of St Constantine (May 21).

At that time the heresy of Arianism, which taught that Christ was merely a creature and not God, was causing great turmoil and division throughout the Empire. Even after the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 325, many people were drawn to this false teaching, and the Orthodox found themselves in the minority in many places.

Constantius, the ruler of the eastern part of the Empire, was a fervent supporter of Arianism. His brothers Constantine II and Constans, who were pious Orthodox Christians, ruled in the west. They were both killed in separate battles around 350, leaving Constantius as sole ruler. Also in 350, St Cyril (March 18) became Patriarch of Jerusalem and began his zealous struggle against Arianism.

In May of 351 a luminous Cross appeared over Jerusalem, stretching from Golgotha to the Mount of Olives, a distance of about five and a half miles. The Cross was wide as it was long, and shone more brightly than the sun. Many people left their homes and workplaces to gather in the church and glorify Christ. The historian Sozomen says that this wondrous sign led to the conversion of multitudes of pagans and Jews to Christianity.

A letter from St Cyril to the emperor describing this phenomenon, and admonishing him to become Orthodox, has been preserved. The apparition of the Cross remained over the city for a whole week.

The vision of the Cross over Jerusalem strengthened the Orthodox faithful and contributed to the return of many Arians to the Church. It is also a reminder of the awesome Second Coming of Christ, when “the sign of the Son of man shall appear in heaven (Matthew 24:30).

APPARITION OF THE HOLY CROSS

This Sunday the Armenian Church commemorates the Feast of the Apparition of the Cross (*Yerevoumun Sourp Khatchi*). The Apparition of the Holy Cross is the first feast dedicated to the Holy Cross in the Armenian liturgical calendar. It is celebrated in remembrance of the appearance of the sign of the cross over the city of Jerusalem in 351 that remained in the sky for several hours. The apparition extended from Golgotha to the Mount of Olives (about two miles), and was brighter than the sun and was seen by everyone in Jerusalem. The Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cyril, used this occasion to remind Emperor Constantius of Byzantium of his father's (Constantine the Great) orthodox faith. Cyril said the Apparition was further reason to return to orthodoxy.

Traditionally, the Armenian translation of Cyril's message is read on this feast day during the Antasdan prior to the Gospel lection. This event is celebrated by the Armenian and Greek churches. The Greeks observe it on the fixed date of May 7, while the Armenian date is moveable depending on the date of Easter. It is celebrated on the fifth Sunday of Easter, which is the fourth Sunday after Easter.

Cyril is a revered Doctor of the Church and he is remembered in the Armenian Church's liturgical calendar. This year he was honored on Saturday, March 3.

Here is a short excerpt from Cyril's letter about the apparition:

“In those holy days of the Easter season, on 7 May at about the third hour, a huge cross made of light appeared in the sky above holy Golgotha extending as far as the holy Mount of Olives. It was not revealed to one or two people alone, but it appeared unmistakably to everyone in the city. It was not as if one might conclude that one had suffered a momentary optical illusion; it was visible to the human eye above the earth for several hours. The flashes it emitted outshone the rays of the sun, which would have outshone and obscured it themselves if it had not presented the watchers with a more powerful illumination than the sun. It prompted the whole populace at once to run together into the holy church, overcome both with fear and joy at the divine vision. Young and old, men and women of every age, even young girls confined to their rooms at home, natives and foreigners, Christians and pagans visiting from abroad, all together as if with a single voice raised a hymn of praise to God's Only-Begotten Son the wonder-worker. They had the evidence of their own senses that the holy faith of Christians is not based on the persuasive arguments of philosophy but on the revelation of the Spirit and power; it is not proclaimed by mere human beings but testified from heaven by God Himself.”

In worship we understand ourselves in relationship with God in a rather unique manner. Worship is not prayer . It is praise. Worship is not asking. Worship is giving. It is giving ourselves and humbling ourselves before that which is greater than ours self. It has been a beautiful journey this year because we have grown, both individually and together. By listening, by talking, by sharing, by extending ourselves, that is, by Loving!

Think of it for a moment. The Love that we share with others defines who we are in, for and around life itself. And we have a new definition today. We have a new lease on life today! We have opportunity to come face-to-face with this holy season, to look at the resurrection with new eyes. Our eyes are focusing beyond crucifixion and we see the empty tomb. We witness and become part of the Tomb. Imagine that.... Sitting in the Tomb of Jesus. Imagine waking up after the torture of crucifixion. Imagine waking up after a burial. We can now share properly what we were intended to share from the very beginning – to become participants in the salvation process. It is not a question of being saved, but one of being a participant. And that is where worship grants us a perfect model.

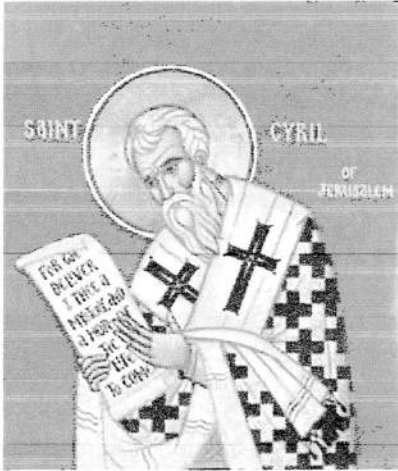
Worship in the Armenian Church is participation. It is an act of participation. It is not witnessing, but throwing yourself into it holistically with all your senses. To visually see what is around you – the visual delights, the colors, the candles, the flowers. To smell the aroma of the flowers at the altar as well as the incense that takes our prayers to heaven. To be able to hear the beautiful tones and tonalities of the angels. Not saying I don't understand so let the angels come to me, but rather asking, how can I fly with the angels. How can I participate? Our sense of touch is also important in the Worship services. We have to touch each another. We have to physically love one another. We have to kiss each other to say "You are important in my life just as I would like to be important in yours." In that touching process we begin to understand what it means to put our feet in the shoes of others. In the shoes of our brothers and sisters, of our people, of others who are struggling. We place our feet in the shoes of others and we understand their difficulties. Perhaps the loss of a job? The loss of a loved one? Perhaps they have an inability to process the spirituality, to process the love that God has put in our heart. And so we reach out to one another physically. Finally we appeal to our sense of taste. We participate by communicating, by communing with the Holy Eucharist, with the precious body and blood of Jesus Christ.

We conclude with a meditation on John chapter 15, Jesus, the True Vine. *Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.*

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Father Vazken Mousesian



Commemoration of the Precious Cross that appeared in the sky over Jerusalem in 351 A.D. (Feast Day - May 7th)

On this day in the year 351, not long after Saint Cyril of Jerusalem had succeeded Maximus as Archbishop of Jerusalem, during the reign of Constantius, the son of Saint Constantine the Great, on the day of Pentecost, the multi-attested sign of the Cross appeared over Jerusalem.

Saint Cyril, in his letter to the Emperor Constantius, describes the event he witnessed with his own eyes:

"On the nones [or 7th] of May, about the third hour [or nine in the morning], a vast luminous body, in the form of a Cross, appeared in the heavens, just over the holy Golgotha, reaching as far as the holy Mount of Olives [that is, almost two miles in length], seen not by one or two persons, but clearly and evidently by the whole city. This was not, as may be thought, a momentary transient phenomenon: for it continued several hours visible to our eyes, and brighter than the sun, the light of which would have eclipsed it, had not this been stronger. The whole city, struck with a reverential fear, tempered with joy, ran immediately to the church, young and old, Christians and heathens, citizens and strangers, all with one voice giving praise to our Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, the worker of miracles; finding by experience the truth of the Christian doctrine, to which the heavens bear witness." (PG 33:1 16q)

He concludes his letter with wishes that the emperor may always glorify the holy and consubstantial Trinity. Historians of the time, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, including Sozomen, Theophanes, Eutychius, John of Nice, Glycas, and others quote Saint Cyril concerning this event. Others, such as Socrates, Philostorgius, and the anonymous *Chronicle of Alexandria* give their own account of this phenomenon. This miracle was regarded by the Christians as the final victory of Orthodoxy over Arianism. Philostorgius and the *Chronicle of Alexandria* affirm that this Cross of light was encircled with a "large rainbow".

Philostorgius writes:

"It appeared at Jerusalem about the third hour of the day which is called the day of Pentecost. This sign, which was portrayed by no human hand, was seen to stretch from the Mount of Calvary even to the Mount of Olives, and was accompanied by a large iris, like a crown, which surrounded it on all sides. The iris, indeed, signified the mercy of Jesus Christ crucified and

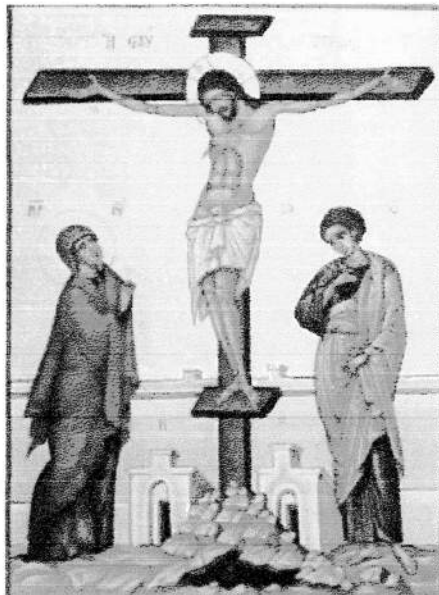
taken up into heaven, and the crown denoted the victory of the emperor. Moreover, that splendid and venerable sign did not escape the notice even of the soldiers. But though it was clearly seen by both armies, it frightened above all measure Magnentius and his partisans, who were addicted to superstitious practices ; while, on the other hand, it inspired Constantius and his army with invincible bravery. Magnentius, however, having suffered this defeat from Constantius, afterwards recovered his strength by degrees, and, engaging with him in a second battle, was entirely defeated, and fled away to Lyons with the loss of nearly all his army." (Ecclesiastical History, Book III, Chapter XXVI)

Socrates writes:

"At the time that Cyril administered the church of Jerusalem after Maximus, the sign of the Cross appeared in the heavens. It shone brilliantly, not with divergent rays like a comet, but with the concentration of a great deal of light, apparently dense and yet transparent. Its length was about fifteen stadia (1) from Calvary to the Mount of Olives, and its breadth was in proportion to its length. So extraordinary a phenomenon excited universal terror. Men, women, and children left their houses, the market-place, or their respective employments, and ran to the church, where they sang hymns to Christ together, and voluntarily confessed their belief in God. The intelligence disturbed in no little measure our entire dominions, and this happened rapidly; for, as the custom was, there were travelers from every part of the world, so to speak, who were dwelling at Jerusalem for prayer, or to visit its places of interest, these were spectators of the sign, and divulged the facts to their friends at home. The emperor was made acquainted with the occurrence, partly by numerous reports concerning it which were then current, and partly by a letter from Cyril the bishop. It was said that this prodigy was a fulfillment of an ancient prophecy contained in the Holy Scriptures [Mathew 24:30]. It was the means of the conversion of many pagans and Jews to Christianity." (Ecclesiastical History, Book IV, Chapter V)

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It would be remembered - and remembered forever - as the day when the sky above the Holy City of Jerusalem suddenly caught fire.

Incandescent and white-hot, the tongues of flame were roaring across the horizon on that early morning in the Year of Our Lord 351 ... *and they were forming a gigantic, blazing cross!*

Stunned senseless by the miracle, the terrified residents of the city fell to their knees and beseeched God to spare them from annihilation. Yet one man - the elderly Jerusalem Patriarch Cyril, who had been praying for just such a sign from the Almighty - witnessed the spectacular apparition with a heart full of joy.

For the faithful Cyril (315-386 A.D.), who had spent much of his adult life in a terrible struggle against several dangerous heresies that threatened the theological purity of the Holy Church, the sudden apparition of the flaming cross was a sure sign that God was standing firmly behind the Patriarch in his fateful battle against the false doctrine known as "Arianism."

Based on the assertion that Christ had not been present as part of God throughout all of eternity, but had simply made His appearance at a particular moment in history, Arianism represented a lethal threat to the orthodox faith of the Holy Church. The danger, of course, was that the world might come to see the Holy Redeemer as a mere mortal - no

different than many other prophets, such as Moses or Elijah - instead of acknowledging Him as part of the Holy Trinity, and thus as God incarnate.

In his great wisdom, the valiant Patriarch understood the gravity of the threat from Arianism. And yet this utterly false doctrine seemed to be gaining strength by the hour! Already, enraged Church bishops throughout the Holy Land were demanding that the besieged Cyril either accept the Arian creed or resign from his post as the most influential leader in all of *Christendom*.

A soft-spoken and humble man who had been raised by pious Christians, St. Cyril had been born in 315 and deeply educated in the Sacred Scriptures. A firmly committed Christian, he had served God as a monk, as a priest and as a presbyter ... before being chosen to succeed the Archbishop Maximos as Patriarch of Jerusalem, upon the latter's death in 350. Within a year of his consecration, however, the growing struggle over Arianism would threaten the future of the Church - with the arrival on the throne of the Roman Emperor Constantius (351-363).

Constantius was a passionate adherent of the heretical doctrine of Arianism, and he staunchly supported the unfaithful bishops who were championing this false belief throughout the empire.

What St. Cyril desperately needed at this hour was a sign from God - a miracle that would be obvious to all, and that would underscore the authority of the Jerusalem Patriarch in this crucially important theological dispute. If only the people could be shown the true path by God, the Church would be saved from terrible error!

Although he was a great leader in the Holy Church of the Fourth Century, Cyril was also a humble monk who loved nothing so much as wandering alone across the vast deserts of ancient Palestine, where he could praise God while also performing ascetic acts of self-denial to his heart's content. Perhaps this was why God answered the saint's fervent prayer for a "sign," on the unforgettable morning when the skies above Jerusalem suddenly burst into brilliant flame!

The amazing revelation began quietly enough. After enduring yet another sleepless night, the struggling Patriarch had awakened near dawn in order to resume his ceaseless prayers to the Almighty.

Kneeling fretfully in his room at the Patriarchal residence on this early morning of May 7, 351, the uneasy Patriarch was reminding himself that today was the Feast of Pentecost - the holy celebration which